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CARMEN

NOVEL AND LIBRETTO—A DRAMATURGIC ANALYSIS

By EDGAR ISTELE

THE source of "Carmen," Bizet's masterpiece, justly to be termed the most original of French operas, was a novel of the same name, published in 1847 by Prosper Mérimée. This distinguished author, whom Goethe esteemed very highly, prefaced his famous story with Paladas' most ungallant Greek motto: "Woman as a whole is bitter. She possesses but two redeeming moments: one in bed and the other at death." The contents of the novel would certainly seem to justify this pessimistic verdict—which, however, is not meant to be generalized. A "she-devil," as one might designate her, after the famous drama ("Der Weibsteufel") of the Austrian author Schönherr, here plays her game of destruction with the man, until both man and woman are sent to eternity. Mérimée's novel consists of four chapters; the fourth is really only a scientific study on the race of the gipsies; the first and second chapters also, in which Mérimée recounts his meeting with José and Carmen, are of only incidental interest in their description of the characteristics of both. It is the third chapter, an autobiographical confession of José when he was condemned to death, which became the source and the plot of the opera.

Carmen, a Christian name, very common in Andalusia, signifies "garden" or "country-house," and is still met with in this signification as the name of cities in Mexico and Argentine. The diminutive form "Carmencita," which also occurs in the opera, is more frequently used as a woman's name. Mérimée's story certainly depicts an actual occurrence. The truthful portrayal of Andalusian life with all its sympathetic and repulsive features must have sprung from very close observation, and the characteristic psychology of the people can be fully appreciated only by one who has spent some time in Andalusia, the most Spanish of Spanish districts. Of special significance, however, is a feature not mentioned in the later version of the opera: José

is a Navarraise, therefore not an Andalusian. This explains his proud, self-assertive attitude, intolerant of humiliation. Carmen, on the other hand, is a gipsy, both in the novel and in the opera. Thus, although the scene is laid in Andalusia, only the subordinate figures are natives of that district. At the beginning of the novel, Mérimée describes an archæological excursion which he made through Andalusia, in the autumn of 1830, accompanied by a guide from Cordoba. By a spring in a woody ravine, they came across a man of wild appearance, whom the guide at once recognized as the notorious bandit, José Navarro, for whose capture a reward of two hundred ducats had been offered. For the dramatist the most interesting part of this first chapter is the description of José: "A young man of middle height, apparently robust, with a proud but gloomy look. His complexion, which originally must have been beautiful, had been tanned by the sun to a darker color than his hair." And later: "Blond hair, blue eyes, a large mouth, fine teeth, small hands, a fine shirt, a velvet jacket with silver buttons, white leather leggings and a brown horse." This gives us a fairly clear idea of José as a bandit.

In the second chapter Mérimée describes how he met Carmencita, the gipsy, one night on the banks of the Guadalquivir:

She had in her hair a bunch of jasmine, whose blossoms gave forth a most intoxicating perfume. She was dressed plainly, almost poorly, in black, like most of the grisettes in the evening. She was "young, small, well-built, and she had very large eyes." Mérimée says later: I doubt very much whether Carmen was thoroughbred: at any rate she was very much more beautiful than any other woman of her race that I have ever seen.

Generally, as he explains in the fourth chapter, the gipsies are very ugly. After speaking of the Spanish ideal of beauty, Mérimée remarks:

My gipsy could not lay claim to so many merits. Her skin was very nearly of the color of copper. Her eyes were oblong, but most marvelously slit; her lips, a little too thick, were well formed and showed teeth whiter than almonds gleaming through them. Her black hair, perhaps too thick, had the bluish reflection of the raven's wing and was long and glossy. In order not to tire by a lengthy description, I will summarize by saying, that to every fault she possessed was added a good feature, which perhaps proved more effective by the contrast. It was a wild, strange sort of beauty, a face which at first bewildered, but which one never forgot. Especially the eyes, which had a voluptuous and at the same time a wild expression which I have never since found in any human face. 'Gipsy eye, wolf eye,' says a Spanish proverb, which shows good observation. Such a person was Carmen.

Later Mérimée heard that José Navarro, as he was called, or Don José¹ Lizarabengoa, as he really was, was in prison and soon to be executed. He visited the bandit, who told the poet the story of his life after having begged him, if he ever passed through Navarra, to give a medal which José had always worn around his neck to a "good woman" (José's mother) in Vittoria. "Tell her I am dead, but not how I died," he added, deeply moved; then he began his story.

We have thus far made the acquaintance of the two principal characters, José and Carmen, and gained an important dramatic motive in the mention of José's mother, who, though not appearing in the drama, influences the plot. Two remarks which José incidentally makes to Mérimée seem to contain the quintessence of the third chapter, the real Carmen tragedy, or perhaps better, the tragedy of José.

Monsieur, on devient coquin sans y penser. Une jolie fille vous fait perdre la tête, on se bat pour elle, un malheur arrive, il faut vivre à la montagne, et de contrebandier on devient voleur, avant d'avoir réfléchi. (One becomes a rogue without realizing it. A pretty woman makes you lose your head, you fight for her, have a bit of bad luck, are compelled to live in the mountains, and from a smuggler one becomes a robber without reflecting.)

The antecedent history of the Carmen plot in the novel is exceptionally short. Only a few words are to be found in the introduction telling how José became a soldier. The librettists have cleverly shortened these words and woven them almost literally into the dialogue in the third scene of the first act—José's conversation with the lieutenant. Incidentally noting that Mi-caëla is dressed in Navarraise costume, the lieutenant asks: "Are you a Navarraise?" Whereupon José answers: "And of old Christian family. My name is Don José Lizarabengoa. I was to have become a priest and began my studies, but did not learn anything, for I was too fond of the ball game. One day, after having won, a youth from Alava sought a quarrel with me; I had the better luck (that meant most likely that José either killed his adversary, or wounded him severely) and was forced to leave the country. I became a soldier." Up to this point the antecedent history is the same as in the novel. Mérimée continues: "Within a short time I became a brigadier, and was promised the position of ser-

¹Don, from the Latin Dominus, at that time a title of nobility. José was of ancient Basque descent and (vielo cristiano) of ancient Christian origin, with neither Moorish nor Jewish blood in his veins,—what most Spaniards of quality pretend to be when quite the contrary is true.

geant, when, unluckily, I was detailed as guard before the cigarette factory in Sevilla." Here the drama sets in.

This libretto was written by the famous Parisian playwrights, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy. Each had worked individually until 1860, when they joined forces and achieved great success with their stage works. In addition to the Carmen libretto their texts to the best Offenbach operettas are especially well known; and the original adaptation of the "Fledermaus" was their idea.

I have shown that the two principal characters were taken from Mérimée's novel. On the other hand, the librettists were obliged to invent the character of Micaëla as a substitute for José's mother, who does not appear. This character was necessary for dramatic reasons, in order to create a contrast to Carmen, and, as it were, to personify the voice of the good in José. Nevertheless, one must admit that the figure possesses little individual life and is too obviously brought in only for construction. As for the other principal characters in the opera, the bull-fighter Escamillo (Mérimée's Lucas), the inn-keeper Lillas Pastia, the smugglers Dancairo and Remendado and also the lieutenant (Zuniga), they are all to be found in the novel. The librettists had merely to invent the two unimportant figures of the gipsies and the brigadier. And yet how genuinely theatrical the book of the text has turned out, even though occasional literal expressions are taken from the novel!

Let us single out a few of the principal scenes to show the dramaturgic art of the librettists. Take, for instance, the most important moment of the exposition, Carmen's entry. Observe how dramatic is her introduction. She does not exactly enter alone, nor does she come with the swarm of workers, who precede her like the personal attendants at the state entry of a princess. After all the girls have passed, we hear the soldiers sing: "We do not see Carmencita!" whereupon the workers and young men answer: "There she is! see the Carmencita!" Carmen is thus made conspicuous as a very individual figure, similarly to José, who is not on the stage at the beginning of the opera. At last she appears. The librettists describe exactly the same costume and manner of entry as that described by Mérimée. She has a bunch of acacia in her bodice, and a blossom in the corner of her mouth. Three or four young men enter with her, they follow her, surround her, and speak to her; she flirts and talks with them. José raises his head, looks at Carmen, and then quietly resumes work on the chain. The young men urge Carmen to tell them when she will

love them. Her first words here give us a sharply defined picture of her personality, in contradistinction to the more detailed description in the novel. It is also to be noticed that Carmen does not directly approach José as in the novel; this would not be so effective on the stage. Instead, she is obliged to disclose her character somewhat through her conversation with the young men, and wins time to study more closely the handsome brigadier, whom she has espied at once, and—to entice him. This is expressed in her first very witty and precise answer:

Quand je vous aimerai? Ma fois, je ne sais pas.
Peut-être jamais, peut-être demain;
Mais pas aujourd'hui, c'est certain!

This refusal plainly discloses the fact that Carmen has chosen José for her lover of to-day. And still more clearly is this expressed in the following famous "Habanera"—which reveals Carmen's conception of love. Nietzsche says: "Eros, as conceived by the ancients—playfully alluring, malicious, demoniacal, invincible. A veritable witch is necessary for the performance. I know of nothing to be compared with this song." Another feature of dramaturgic significance in the first act is the scene commonly designated as the "tragical moment." In his famous book: "The Technique of the Drama", which was preëminently inspired by Shakespeare's technique, Gustav Freytag writes as follows about the introduction of this "moment":

If at a certain point of the plot something sad, gloomy, or dreadful suddenly occurs which, though quite contrary to that which precedes it, can immediately be recognized as a result of the causative combination of incidents preceding and which the assumption of the plot renders believable—this new instant is to be considered a "tragic moment." The "tragic moment" must therefore possess the three following distinctive features:

1. It must be important and momentous for the hero.
2. It must burst upon one unexpectedly.
3. It must, by means of a chain of subordinate ideas perceptible to the spectator, stand in a reasonable connection with the foregoing action.

These three conditions are fulfilled here. The "tragic moment" in this case is especially caused by the circumstance that, exactly at the moment when José, owing to his mother's letter and the newly sealed love for Micaëla, fancies himself to be protected from Carmen and the "demon," the incident occurs which forms the first link in the chain of his fate—Carmen's business with the knife. Without this episode, the entire following tragedy would be quite inconceivable. To be sure, the "tragic moment" in the

drama is only one of many effects. It can, as is usually the case, appear only once, but it can also be used more frequently in the same play. In "Carmen," for instance, the second "tragic moment" is to be found in the second act. José here has decided to leave Carmen forever, and to remain true to his soldier's honor, when suddenly he is driven to jealousy by the return of the lieutenant. Here the effect is particularly strong owing to the contrast between José's intention and this sudden occurrence, which is so momentous for him. In Greek dramaturgies the term "peripetie" was used for this kind of "tragic moment."

The events of the second act have been sharply worked out by the librettists from single facts taken from the novel, where their course is blurred by all sorts of accessories. The choice of Lillas Pastia's inn as the scene of these events seems a happy one. In the novel the inn does not play an important part: there it is in the house of an old match-making gipsy in the Candilejo Street that Carmen's love-meetings take place, first with José and later with the lieutenant.

The main line of José's development in the novel is this: From a punished brigadier he is degraded to a common soldier, who, however, retains his soldier's honor; through jealousy, he passes to open rebellion against an officer and even to murder of that officer; then, no other choice remaining, he becomes a smuggler. Let us now briefly examine how the novel proceeds, emphasizing those points which the dramatists could use.

José in prison describes his spiritual condition, the regret for his heedless folly, the contempt he felt for Carmen. And yet he could not cease thinking of her; he became sensually intoxicated when he recalled the extraordinary image of her silk stockings with the numerous holes in them; he compared all the women who passed by the prison to Carmen, found none as beautiful as she, and unintentionally inhaled the scent of the acacia blossom. "If there are such things as witches," he says, "then this girl is one." But Carmen also thought of him. She smuggled a loaf of bread and a gold piece into the prison. The bread concealed a strong English file with which he could have filed through the strongest bars, and with the gold piece he could have bought other clothes and escaped. José, however, looked upon desertion as a crime, and the gold piece seemed to him like pay and angered him. After having served his term, he was degraded and put on guard as a common soldier. Here, in front of the colonel's house, where Carmen had been dancing, he first saw her again. She asked him to meet her that same evening at Lillas Pastia's when he came off

duty. Pastia is described as an "old fish-baker, gipsy, as black as a Moor, at whose place many of the city-folk ate fish, especially since Carmen had been in the habit of going there." Carmen at once took José to walk with her, and he returned to her the gold piece, keeping the file, however, as a souvenir. Not having much money just then, Carmen suggested that they consume the gold piece together; and so they bought oranges, bread, sausage, a bottle of Manzanilla, a great quantity of sweets and candied fruit. Then they went to the gipsy's house, and as soon as they were alone Carmen began to dance as if she were crazy and to sing, saying: "You are my Rom! I your Romi!" (in gipsy language, "Rom" means husband, "Romi," wife), and falling on his neck cried: "I will pay my debt according to the law of the gipsies!" The manner in which she paid her debt is pretty plainly alluded to in the novel: "Ah! Monsieur, that day! . . . that day! . . . when I think of it I forget to-morrow!" cried the bandit, who is telling the writer of his life after he has been condemned to death. Carmen and José spent the entire day together, eating and drinking, and there was not a mad prank she left undone. José wished to see Carmen dance. She had no castanets, so she broke the only plate the old gipsy had and danced as if she had had real ones. "One was never bored with this girl; to that I can swear," said José. When evening came, José, hearing the retreat, said to Carmen: "I must return to the barracks." "To the barracks?" she replied disdainfully, "are you a negro slave that fears the stick? You are a real canary bird¹ inside and out. Go, you are a coward!" And José remained, though he knew it meant arrest for him again.

This turn of affairs in the novel, where José has already enjoyed Carmen's favors and fallen a victim to her charm, is most natural. In the drama it was better to let the conflict between soldier's honor and love (which in the novel had occurred much earlier, during José's arrest) occur here, and to allow José to decide to avoid Carmen forever. Meantime we are told that after the first night Carmen already spoke of parting, though she declared that she was "a little in love" with José. However, she said that wolf and dog could not agree for long. He should be happy that she, the veritable devil, had not wrung his neck; he should burn a candle before the Madonna and forget Carmencita, else he would probably finish by hanging on her account. But ultimately Carmen made use of José's absolute surrender to win him for the smugglers' band. She described, in a most tempting manner, the romantic life they would lead together on horseback in the moun-

¹A nick-name for the yellow dragons.

tains. No officer, no tattoo for him to obey; absolute freedom! He must follow her there if he loved her. Wonderful here, and similar to the parallel seduction scene in the first act, is José's cry, "Carmen!" This cry contains all the nuances of his feelings up to the point where it seems as though he must surrender. But here, where Carmen demands everything, not as in the first act only a small favor—here, where his honor as a soldier is concerned, conscience still is the stronger; he tears himself away and bids Carmen farewell. She tells him she hates him and that parting now means farewell forever. Very well; José has decided to break with her. At this point fate appears: as José is about to open the door, some one on the other side knocks and we hear the voice of the lieutenant calling Carmen. From this moment José is forever at the mercy of the fate which binds him to Carmen, and the incidents urge rapidly forward to the inevitable crisis. The careful manner in which the dramatic entry of the lieutenant is led up to, beginning with the first act, the way in which his untimely arrival occurs exactly on the climax of the last farewell, are admirable, when compared with the chance meeting in the novel. Here one is reminded preëminently of Goethe's exposition in his "Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre" (V, 7):

In a novel, opinions and events should be given precedence: in a drama, characters and deeds. The novel must proceed slowly and the sentiments of the principal figures should, in whatever manner it may be, retard the development of the plot. The drama should move quickly and the character of the principal figure should have the tendency to push on to the end, and only then be retarded. The novel hero should be passive, or at least not active in the highest degree: one requires effect and action for the dramatic hero. . . . Therefore it is agreed that chance might play its part in a novel; that, however, such chance must always be controlled and directed by the sentiments of the characters; but that, on the other hand, a Fate which urges people on without their coöperation, by means of disconnected outward circumstances, toward an unforeseen catastrophe, can occur only in a drama; that chance may call forth pathetic but never tragic situations; that Fate, however, must always be terrible, and that it becomes tragic in the highest degree when it involves alike innocent and guilty deeds that are independent of each other.

The further development of the second act seems to me to be an improvement on the novel. In the opera José does not kill the lieutenant. Instead, the officer is disarmed by the smugglers who come at Carmen's bidding. And this change to rogue's humor adds a welcome touch of color to the picture. Moreover, Carmen's death at the close produces a much more thrilling effect if no one has been killed earlier in the drama. The less frequent a

murder, the more terrible its effects. The piling of corpses, of which Shakespeare was so fond, does not appeal to our modern taste.

The events of the third act have very little connection with the plot of the novel, for it was formed quite independently, although many a feature of the original sketch was used. The novel describes a great number of adventures in the smuggler's life. A few characteristic features, in so far as they are of value for a clearer understanding of the act, shall be mentioned here. Carmen served the smugglers as an efficient spy; goods were continually being smuggled from Gibraltar to the coast, then brought up into the mountains, where they were hidden, and later taken to Ronda (a magnificent lofty crag high up in the mountains). It is probable that the third act takes place near Ronda. José maintained that the life of a smuggler pleased him more than the life of a soldier. When he had money and a sweetheart, seldom he felt remorse. (One should observe how cleverly his remorse is awakened in the third act by the appearance of Micaëla.) José was highly esteemed by these people because he had already killed a man, a deed which was looked upon as an act of heroism. At first Carmen was very much in love with him, but would not admit to her comrades that he was her lover; yes, he even had to swear not to say anything about this. José soon learned the reason for this secrecy. For Carmen was married! (This feature was rightly done away with by the librettists.) Her husband, the one-eyed Garcia, a crafty gipsy, had up to this time been a galley-slave. Carmen, who did not lack a certain feeling of faithfulness, despite her love-affairs with José, had succeeded in freeing her husband by captivating the doctor at the citadel. Soon after, Garcia appeared on the scene, and José maintains that he had never met a more shameful scoundrel and that his soul was blacker than his skin. The following incident illustrates Carmen's treacherous character. She wished to lure a rich Englishman to Ronda, where he should suddenly be attacked, robbed, perhaps even killed. José was to arrange it so that Garcia would be in the foreground, where he would serve as a target for the Englishmen, who were good shots, and would probably kill him. José shuddered at the thought of this devilish plan, which Carmen smilingly proposed to him. He answered that though he hated Garcia, he was his comrade and that some day he would free Carmen from him, not by treachery but in an honorable duel. Soon after this conversation, José really provoked a quarrel with Garcia, which ended in a combat with knives, during which José killed his adversary.

This episode served the librettists as a model for the fight between José and Escamillo in the third act. Carmen, on hearing she was a widow, remarked: "His time had come, and yours will also come." José answered: "Yours also, if you are not a faithful wife!" "For all I care!" she cried. "I have often enough seen in the grounds of the coffee that we are to end together.—Bah! come what may!" This feeling of fatalism, which also inspired Bizet with the touching Carmen theme, has been strongly emphasized by the librettists, especially in the third and fourth acts. Without mentioning further incidents in the smuggler's life, let us single out an utterance of Carmen, which is very characteristic of her as she appears in the third act:

Do you know that since you are my husband (Rom) I love you much less than when you were my lover (Minchorro)?¹ I do not like to be tormented, and still more I hate being commanded. I wish to be free and do what I please. Take care not to drive me to desperation; if you begin to bore me, I shall know where to find an obliging youth, who will treat you as you did the one-eyed one.

This is the material from which the librettists have formed the third act. It is not very abundant, and was utilized to a much less degree than that which was at their disposal for the first and second acts. What the librettists had in view with their third act is clear. They wished to sketch a picture of the smuggler's life and José's new existence, and at the same time to show that Carmen, weary of the jealous tyranny of her lover, looks forward with keen anticipation to a new attachment. José, on the other hand, though feeling remorse over his new mode of life, cannot tear himself away from Carmen. The introduction of Micaëla and Escamillo into this act, even though their appearance is "opera-like" and but weakly motivated, serves only to this end. This third act is, on the whole, not so well founded, in a dramatic sense, as the preceding ones. The Carmen tragedy draws to its close. The love-affair with the bull-fighter becomes the cause of the catastrophe in the novel as well as in the opera. The dramatists introduced the figure of Escamillo quite early in the plot. In the second act he is kept in suspense by Carmen, while in the third it is quite clear that she has grown tired of José and bestowed her affections on him. In the novel the Picador Lucas (the original model for Escamillo) does not appear until much later. Carmen makes his acquaintance during the bull-fight in Granada. When taken to task by José, she tries to persuade him to accept the

¹Gipsy lingo.

young fellow as one of the band. José forbids her to speak to the Picador, as he neither needs Lucas nor his money. "Take care!" is Carmen's characteristic answer, "if one suspects me of doing a thing, it soon happens!" In the meantime she seems to have forgotten Lucas. Then, however, José, hearing she had gone to the bull-fights in Cordoba, followed her in a fury. He saw her together with Lucas, and immediately grasped the situation. On this day, however, Lucas met with an accident. His horse stumbled and threw him in front of the bull, thereby endangering his life. Carmen vanished without leaving any trace, but appeared again at two in the morning in their joint lurking-place and followed José without resistance on horseback. They arrived at a lonely inn, near a hermitage, in the morning. That which follows, though differing for the greater part from the drama, none the less evinces a certain similarity. The difference between novel and drama can best be studied at this point. Let us merely outline the most essential moments of the novel:

José: Hear me; I will forget everything, and never allude to anything again; but promise to follow me to America and be respectable.

Carmen (defiantly): I do not wish to go to America. I am happy here.

José: Because you are near Lucas. But let me tell you, when he is cured he will not grow old. But why should I lay hands on him? I am tired of killing your lovers; I will kill you.

Carmen (staring at him with a wild look): I have always known you would kill me . . . It is written so.

José: Carmencita, do you no longer love me? (She gave no answer, but sat on a mat with her legs crossed, and drew figures in the sand with her fingers.)

José (bitterly): We will begin a new life, Carmen; we will live somewhere and never be separated. (He then began to count the money he had with him.)

Carmen (smiling): First I and then you. I knew it would be that way (another allusion to Fate).

José: Think it over! My patience and strength are exhausted. Decide, or I shall have to.

Then he left her and went to the hermitage, where he had a mass read for a soul which perhaps might soon appear before its Maker. This pious trait in a bandit and assassin is very characteristic of southern ideas. During the mass, however, he remained outside the chapel, and then returned to the inn. He hoped that Carmen might have escaped—she could have mounted the horse and fled to safety. But she was still there. She did not want him to be able to say that she had been afraid. He found her pouring lead, with a sad expression on her face, and singing an

old gipsy song. She again followed him on horseback, and after awhile the discussion was resumed.

José: My Carmen, you will come with me, will you not?

Carmen: To the grave, yes, but I will not longer live with you. I see that you will kill me, this is written, but you will never force me to yield.

José: I beg you to be sensible. Listen! Let all that is past be forgotten! You know it was for your sake alone that I ruined myself. For you alone I have become a robber and assassin. Carmen, my Carmen! Let me save you and myself with you!

Carmen: José, you demand the impossible. I no longer love you, but you love me and therefore wish to kill me. I could lie to you, but I will not take the trouble. Between us all is over. As my husband you have the right to kill your wife, but Carmen will always remain free. She was born a gipsy and will die one!

José: You love Lucas, then?

Carmen: Yes, I loved him, as I did you, a moment only, perhaps less than you. Now I love no one, and hate myself for having loved you.

José threw himself at her feet, seized her hands and covered them with tears. He reminded her of all the happy hours they had passed together. He would remain a robber for her sake, would promise her everything if she would but love him again. She answered, "To love you again is impossible, and I will not live with you." . . . At this he became furious and drew his knife. He wished she had shown fear and had begged for mercy, but this woman was a demon. "For the last time," he cried, "will you remain with me?" "No! no no!" she cried, and stamping her foot on the ground, drew a ring, which José had given her, from her finger, and threw it into the bushes. At this he stabbed her twice, and with Garcia's knife to boot. She fell at the second thrust without uttering a sound.

I thought (said José) I saw her large black eyes fixed on me again; they became dim and closed. I stood for an hour unnerved before the body; then it occurred to me that I had often heard Carmen say she wished to be buried in the woods. I dug a grave for her with my knife. For a long while I searched for her ring; I found it at last and placed it, together with a small cross, in the grave. Perhaps I did wrong. Then I mounted my horse, rode to Cordoba and gave myself up to the gendarmes. I confessed to having killed Carmen, but refused to tell where her grave was. The hermit was a pious man; he had prayed for her, and had said a mass for her soul! Poor child! The gipsies are to blame; they brought her up that way!

Such is the close of Mérimée's novel, one of the most touching descriptions of the tragic end of a great love. Death and burial in a lonely wood, the hermit's mass. What a picture of poetic

charm! The dramatists, however, had to be relentless. The drama demanded brevity and sharp contrasts, and therefore very few of these poetic features could be utilized. For this reason, the librettists brought the ruined José and the splendidly dressed Carmen together. This created a sharp outward contrast. They let Carmen, by no means in reduced circumstances, but rather as the happy mistress of the brilliant Escamillo, whom she loves in her turn, die at the very moment when her new lover has won a great victory. The tragic feature of the ring (also taken from the novel) which Carmen throws away, is here used as the climax of a short discussion which more and more provokes José. Nietzsche wrote on the margin of his piano score:

Last scene a *dramatic masterpiece*, to study for climax, contrast, logic, etc.—And again, concerning the conclusion of the opera, in the “Case of Wagner”: At last love, love restored to nature! Not the move of a “higher virgin”! No Senta-sentimentality! But love as fate, as fatality, cynical, innocent, cruel,—precisely therein human nature. Love, which in its means signifies war, in its foundation the deadly hatred of the sexes! I know of no other case where the tragic yoke, which is the essence of love, is so sharply expressed, becomes so frightful a formula, as in José’s last cry, with which the work closes:

C’est moi qui l’ai tuée.

Oh! ma Carmen, ma Carmen adorée!

Such an interpretation of love (the only one worthy of a philosopher) is rare; it raises a work of art above thousands of others. For the most part artists are like everyone else, even worse—they misunderstand love.

It is very little known, by most theatre-goers, that the “Carmen” produced on most stages to-day is not in the original form as composed by Bizet. At the first performance of the work at the Théâtre de l’Opéra-Comique,¹ Paris, on March 3d, 1875, it was given as an “opéra comique” in the conventional sense of the word—that is, an opera with spoken dialogue. In this form it has been published in Vol. vii of “Théâtre de Meilhac et Halévy,” in which the intimate relation of the detailed dialogue to the novel may be studied. The completely composed version, with the recitatives, performed on most stages to-day, first sprang into existence after Bizet’s death. The recitatives, musically composed in Bizet’s style, were written by Ernest Guiraud, one of his most intimate friends. Guiraud’s recitatives, the texts of which were presumably shortened and adapted by Meilhac and Halévy, are certainly a little masterpiece. Strange to say, they were

¹As everyone knows, the idea of “opéra comique” is quite inconsistently employed by the French, and is even applied to tragic works, if they happen to contain spoken dialogue.

composed for the first Vienna performance (Oct 23, 1875) which, as is well known, inspired the success of the work all over the world. "Carmen" had been so coldly received in Paris that Bizet's unexpected early death has frequently been attributed to the Parisian failure. According to information received from the Vienna Opera House management, Jauner, then Director in Vienna, used only a part, to be sure, of the recitatives. Apparently they seemed to him too incomplete, while he retained the dialogue for other scenes. To my great surprise I heard the work in this "Jauner" form in Vienna in 1899. At that time I had no idea that the original version included the dialogue, and mistook the form given for a later adaptation. It was not until May 26, 1900, that Gustav Mahler produced the opera in Vienna with the recitatives only. The revival of "Carmen" in Berlin on Dec. 12, 1891, showed that generally speaking no very clear idea prevailed as to how matters stood. The critics thought *Bizet's* recitatives had been "restored," and found the dialogue "*ridiculous*." Whoever takes pains to study the dialogue will hardly be able to agree with this verdict. On the contrary, the question is, whether it might not be better to return to the original form. To be sure, the completely composed version has the one great advantage, that it allows our opera singers to reach their "effective" numbers more quickly. On the other hand, the plot, as a consequence of this short version, remains in most cases quite unintelligible to those who have not read the novel. It would overstep the bounds of this study were I to compare both versions in detail. Those especially interested in this question may turn to a dissertation entitled "Carmen as a type of musical poetics" (1915), written by a young Berlin philologist, Fritz Hühne. Following my suggestion, Hühne used this theme in taking his Doctor's degree at the University of Greifswald. In this very painstaking study—I regret to say, more scholarly than artistic—Hühne has attempted to show the contrast between both forms in detail, and with characteristic German thoroughness has examined the plot with regard to "idea," "uniformity," and "probability." We can here forget all such philosophico-philological fault-finding, and confine ourselves to an examination of the principal points of the plot in both versions. On the whole, the recitative form in the first act does not produce an unfavorable effect; though occasionally it creates slight improbabilities because of lack of motivation. Take as an example the lieutenant's first question about the cigarette factory. In the dialogue, this is very briefly motivated. He has been only two days with the regiment, and is in Sevilla for the

first time. In the recitative form, on the other hand, the naïf lieutenant, who questions his sergeant about something known all over town, appears positively ridiculous. There are many such passages in "Carmen," but the public has grown so accustomed to absurd opera text-books, that it puts up with anything as long as it hears "beautiful" music.

Guiraud did right to cut out a flirtation episode, in pantomime, which took place between Micaëla's exit and the mounting of the guard, and to replace it with a repetition of the opening chorus. Though set to music by Bizet, this episode checked the dramatic progress and was probably written only in order to give the singer of "Morales" a "grateful" number. It was all the more disturbing, as the public would readily imagine that the episode would have importance in the drama later on. The first law in dramatic art is, never to divert attention from the principal line of action by the insertion of unimportant incidents.

Guiraud's very much shortened adaptation has an unfavorable effect especially in the second act, where the fifth scene between Carmen and José is robbed of many essential features. The original dialogue follows the novel very closely. José has just been at liberty two hours, when Carmen reminds him of the file and the gold piece, with which he could have bought other clothes and escaped sooner. José answers with an allusion to his soldier's honor, and returns Carmen's money. She buys all sorts of good things from Pastia with the gold piece. José tells her that he bore his punishment willingly, because he loved, adored her. She answers that she will pay her debt according to the law of the gipsies. They eat together and Carmen deports herself as if crazy and tells him she has just been dancing for the lieutenant and other officers and that the lieutenant had made her a declaration of love. José is jealous, but she laughs at him, saying that she will dance for him alone. She breaks his plate to use the pieces as castanets, as she cannot find hers at first.

In the *recitative* version we totally miss the really lovable sides of Carmen's character. Such a radical method of blue-penciling robs this scene of very much of its charm. José says he has been in prison two months, but that he bore the punishment willingly because he loves Carmen. Her only answer is that officers were there and that she had been dancing for them. José is jealous, but she pacifies him by saying she will dance for him alone. These proceedings are extremely unnatural, and rob Carmen's character of all sympathetic traits. Her lover comes to her straight from prison, she has not troubled herself about him,

does not even offer him the least refreshment, torments him with jealousy, and then—dances for him. This is apparently nonsense, but nevertheless Carmen is given with this version on most stages, year in year out.

In Mérimée's novel as well as in Meilhac and Halévy's dialogue, Carmen is fickle and wilful, but not of such a bad nature. She is not the "salon-snake" of most of our prima donnas, but a naïve child of the people, who merely follows her primitive instincts. Much of the nonsense about Bizet's Carmen character would never have been written had people taken pains to look at the librettist's original text. While brevity is desirable for the stage, it should never be employed at the expense of all that is characteristic. This scene could easily have been depicted with more detail in the recitative version. Again, owing to Guiraud's brevity, Micaëla's appearance alone in the mountains in the middle of the night becomes quite incomprehensible. The original form called for a guide, who is seen on the rocks shortly before José disappears, and who, after José is gone, calls Micaëla, who approaches cautiously. The guide assures her that he is acquainted with the smugglers' habits. One of them is keeping guard, and therefore it is dangerous to be seen. Micaëla answers she wishes to be seen, as she must speak to one of the smugglers. The guide thinks she is a brave girl, because she had shown no fear when they met the wild steers, which the famous Escamillo was transporting, and now even wishes to go to the gipsies. She answers she is not afraid to be alone, whereupon the guide "naïvely" begs to be dismissed, saying she had paid him well, otherwise he would never have come. He wishes her good luck, but thinks it most extraordinary that she should stroll about here.

In the recitative this entire scene is cut and only a short introduction leads up to Micaëla's aria. I do not consider this to be effective, for her appearance here alone, in the middle of the night, is inclined to produce an "opera-like" effect in the worst sense of the word. Escamillo's sudden entry would also be more effective were it better led up to. In fact, at this point the new adaptation is unquestionably to be condemned. The scenic disposition is also poor. Micaëla's sentimental aria, written only in order to give the singer a "grateful" number, and her appearance in the Finale, savour of make-shift construction.

It is not quite clear to me whether Bizet or Guiraud shortened the duel between Escamillo and José. The librettists have sketched it in detail. Escamillo fights nobly and does not take advantage over José, declaring that he is a bull-fighter and not a

man-killer (rather sentimental for one of his calling). Then José gets the advantage over his adversary as Escamillo slips, and is about to kill him, despite his noble-mindedness, when Carmen saves his life in the nick of time. In the final version the duel takes place quickly in pantomime.

Guiraud inserted a Ballet taken from Bizet's "*Arlésienne*" into the last act, which originally contained only a dialogue between the lieutenant and the gipsies. In this way Frasquita learns many particulars which cause her to warn Carmen. The adaptation here is good, as it does away with the dialogue, which was not absolutely necessary and only interrupted the line of action.

Generally speaking, one can say that despite a lack of motivation which the original Carmen libretto possessed, the book in its present form is one of the most eminent opera-texts to be found. It is a masterpiece, especially in its splendid scenic construction, fine individual characterization, and real contrasts for music.

One of the chief merits of the Carmen subject is that it has no antecedent history. In opera this is generally hazardous, as the public rarely understands the words, and a detailed exposition remains entirely unintelligible. When the curtain rises in "*Carmen*" we are not obliged to know a thing about any of the characters. All we have to learn is that José has an old mother who has chosen Micaëla for his wife, and that he really loves the little country girl. We see this simple bit of antecedent history before our eyes. That Carmen's past is shrouded in mystery adds to her charm as we follow the development of her relations to the different men in the opera. The action is masterfully divided among four acts in such a manner as to place the climax exactly in the middle, at the close of the second act. The close of each act is in its way the climax of a part of the action. In the first two acts Carmen attracts José; in the last two, up to the catastrophe, she casts him off.

It is astonishing how late the recognition of the "*Carmen*" libretto came. Comparatively speaking, Bizet's music was appreciated much earlier than the book of the text. Even before the first performance, the director of the Opéra-Comique begged the librettists to let the opera end "happily," because to please the public it should under no circumstances end tragically.

At the first performance other objections began to make themselves manifest: above all, the heroine's character was found fault with. The "*Ménestrel*" of March 7, 1875, says: "The fault with this book is not that it is poorly constructed; on the contrary, it

is full of talent, but none of the characters are interesting." And the "Guide Musical" of March 11th maintains that both the principal characters were "of an antipathetic nature and devoid of interest." In Vienna the libretto was termed "uninteresting," and at the first Berlin performance there were critics who found Carmen's character "repulsive." For a long time, in spite of "Carmen's" growing popularity, one might have heard opinions, especially in "Wagnerian" circles, radically different from that of Nietzsche, who was enthusiastic in his praise and admiration of the opera. He called it an untamed piece of nature. Setting aside the fact that Guiraud decidedly misrepresented Carmen's character at the most critical moments, it was probably the originality and genius of the work which was most painful for the average French and German philistine to bear. For such natures are accustomed to see beautiful wild beasts well guarded in zoölogical gardens, and if they happen to run about free and untamed, the philistines immediately call for the æsthetic police. This elevating spectacle has been the custom for a long time in all European countries. On the other hand, Goethe once declared: "America, you are better off than our old continent." Let us hope that he was right—in this matter as in others.

(Translated by Janet Wylie Istel.)